BOOK
Dreyer's English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style

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SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]
"We all write, all the time: books, blogs, emails. Lots and lots of emails. And we all want to write better. Benjamin Dreyer is here to help.

As Random House's copy chief, Dreyer has upheld the standards of the legendary publisher for more than two decades. He is beloved by authors and editors alike—not to mention his followers on social media—for deconstructing the English language with playful erudition. Now he distills everything he has learned from the myriad books he has copyedited and overseen into a useful guide not just for writers but for everyone who wants to put their best prose foot forward.

"My job is to lay my hands on that piece of writing and make it…better. Cleaner. Clearer. More efficient. Not to rewrite it, not to bully and flatten it into some notion of Correct Prose, whatever that might be, but to burnish and polish it and make it the best possible version of itself that it can be—to make it read even more like itself than it did when I got to work on it. That is, if I've done my job correctly.

"Copyediting also involves shaking loose and rearranging punctuation—I sometimes feel as if I spend half my life prying up commas and the other half tacking them down someplace else—and keeping an eye open for dropped words ("He went to store") and repeated words ("He went to the the store") and other glitches that can take root during writing and revision.

"Copy editors," she intoned, and I can still hear every crisp consonant and orotund vowel, all these years later, "are like priests, safeguarding their faith."

"And that's how I learned to copyedit: by observing copyediting, how it was done and how writers responded to it, by taking note of the sorts of flaws, ranging from more or less inarguable errors of grammar to more or less arguable missteps of style and taste, and how copy editors addressed them."

"We're all of us writers: We write term papers and office memos, letters to teachers and product reviews, journals and blog entries, appeals to politicians. Some of us write books. All of us write emails.*5 And, at least as I've observed it, we all want to do it better: We want to make our points more clearly, more elegantly; we want our writing to be appreciated, to be more effective; we want—to be quite honest—to make fewer mistakes."

"No two stylebooks, I might add, can ever agree on everything you want to know about writing."

“HERE’S YOUR FIRST CHALLENGE: Go a week without writing very rather really quite in fact And you can toss in—or, that is, toss out—“just” (not in the sense of “righteous” but in the sense of “merely”) and “so” (in the “extremely” sense, though as conjunctions go it’s pretty disposable too).”

“Oh yes: “pretty.” As in “pretty tedious.” Or “pretty pedantic.” Go ahead and kill that particular darling. And “of course.” That’s right out. And “surely.” And “that said.” And “actually”? Feel free to go the rest of your life without another “actually.” If you can last a week without writing any of what I’ve come to think of as the Wan Intensifiers and Throat Clearers—I wouldn’t ask you to go a week without saying them; that would render most people, especially British people, mute—you will at the end of that week be a considerably better writer than you were at the beginning.”

“If you can abstain from these twelve terms for a week, and if you read not a single additional word of this book—if you don’t so much as peek at the next paragraph—I’ll be content.”

“They aid us in using our words to their preeminent purpose: to communicate clearly with our readers. Let’s call these reasons the Four C’s, shall we? Convention. Consensus. Clarity. Comprehension.”

“One of the best ways to determine whether your prose is well-constructed is to read it aloud. A sentence that can’t be readily voiced is a sentence that likely needs to be rewritten.”

“A good sentence, I find myself saying frequently, is one that the reader can follow from beginning to end, no matter how long it is, without having to double back in confusion because the writer misused or omitted a key piece of punctuation, chose a vague or misleading pronoun, or in some other way engaged in inadvertent misdirection.”

1. Never Begin a Sentence with “And” or “But.” No, do begin a sentence with “And” or “But,” if it strikes your fancy to do so. Great writers do it all the time. As do even not necessarily great writers, like the person who has, so far in this book, done it a few times and intends to do it a lot more.

2. Never Split an Infinitive. To cite the most famous split infinitive of our era—and everyone cites this bit from the original Star Trek TV series, so zero points to me for originality—“To boldly go where no man has gone before.”*5

3. Never End a Sentence with a Preposition. This is the rule that invariably (and wearily) leads to a rehash of the celebrated remark by Winston Churchill that Winston Churchill, in reality, neither said nor wrote: “This is the kind of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put.”

“Ending a sentence with a preposition (as, at, by, for, from, of, etc.*6) isn’t always such a hot idea, mostly because a sentence should, when it can, aim for a powerful finale and not simply dribble off like an old man’s unhappy micturition.”

“Southern Gal, amiably, to Frosty Matron: So where y’all from? Frosty Matron, no doubt giving Southern Gal a once-over through a lorgnette: I’m from a place where people don’t end their sentences with prepositions. Southern Gal, sweetly, after a moment’s consideration: OK. So where y’all from, b*****?”

1. Contractions Aren’t Allowed in Formal Writing. This may be a fine rule to observe if you want to sound as if you learned English on your native Mars, but there’s not a goshdarn thing wrong with “don’t,” “can’t,” “wouldn’t,” and all the rest of them that people naturally use, and without them many a piece of writing would turn out stilted and wooden.

2. The Passive Voice Is to Be Avoided. A sentence written in the passive voice is one whose subject would, in a sentence constructed in the active voice, be its object.

3. Sentence Fragments. They're Bad. I give you one of my favorite novel openers of all time, that of Charles Dickens's Bleak House: London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather.

4. A Person Must Be a "Who." I don't know why violation of this nonrule flips some people out, but it does, and they can get loudly cranky about it. So just as loudly, for the people up there in the cheap seats: A person can be a "that."

5. "None" Is Singular and, Dammit, Only Singular. If you can find fault with the sentence "None of us are going to the party," you have an ear better attuned to the English language than mine.*10

6. "Whether" Must Never Be Accompanied by "Or Not." In many sentences, particularly those in which the word "whether" is being used as a straight-up "if," no "or not" is called for.

7. Never Introduce a List with "Like." "Great writers of the twentieth century like Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, and William Faulkner…" Screech of brakes as a squad car of grammar police pulls that burgeoning sentence to the side of the road and demands that "like" be replaced with "such as."

"IF WORDS ARE THE FLESH, MUSCLE, AND BONE OF PROSE, punctuation is the breath. In support of the words you've carefully selected, punctuation is your best means of conveying to the reader how you mean your writing to be read, how you mean for it to sound. A comma sounds different than a semicolon; parentheses make a different noise than dashes."

PERIODS

1. Q. Two spaces after a period at the end of a sentence, right? A. Wrong. I know that back when you were in seventh-grade typing class and pecking away at your Smith Corona Coronet Automatic 12, Mrs. Tegnell taught you to type a double space after a sentence-ending period, but you are no longer in the seventh grade, you are no longer typing on a typewriter, and Mrs. Tegnell is no longer looking over your shoulder.

2. The fashion of punctuating acronyms and initialisms with periods has, well, gone out of fashion, so one is far less likely nowadays to see F.B.I. than FBI, U.N.E.S.C.O. than UNESCO, etc. Insofar as academic degrees are concerned, I'm less keen on BA, MD, and PhD (rather than B.A., M.D., and Ph.D.), though I'm getting used to them, especially for the sorts of degrees that run to four or more letters, and especially in the service of those learned sorts who festoon their names with multiple degrees,*4 and am happy to save my instinctual squabbling for something else.

4. Some of us have a hard time dropping the periods from the abbreviation U.S., perhaps simply out of habit, perhaps because US looks to us like the (shouted) objective case of "we."

5. Feel free to end a sentence shaped like a question that isn't really a question with a period rather than a question mark. It makes a statement, doesn't it.

"THE SERIES COMMA The series comma is the comma that separates the last two bits in a list of words or phrases before the concluding conjunction "and" or "or" or sometimes even "but," as in: apples, pears, oranges, tangerines, tangelos, bananas, and cherries."

"Quite possibly you know this comma as the Oxford comma—because, we're told, it's traditionally favored by the editors at Oxford University Press. But as a patriotic American, and also because that attribution verges on urbane legendarianism, I'm loath to perpetuate that story."

“Whatever you want to call it: Use it. I don’t want to belabor the point; neither am I willing to negotiate it. Only godless savages eschew the series comma. No sentence has ever been harmed by a series comma, and many a sentence has been improved by one.”

“Sometimes a comma makes no sense at all. Suddenly, he ran from the room. Makes it all rather less sudden, doesn’t it.”

“Colons are not merely introductory but presentational. They say: Here comes something! Think of colons as little trumpet blasts, attention-getting and ear-catching. Also loud. So don’t use so many of them that you give your reader a headache.”

“If what follows a colon is a full sentence, begin that full sentence with a capital letter, which signals to your reader: What’s about to commence includes a subject, a verb, the works, and should be read as such.”

“I love semicolons like I love pizza; fried pork dumplings; Venice, Italy; and the operas of Puccini. Why does the sentence above include semicolons? Because the most basic use of semicolons is to divide the items in a list any of whose individual elements mandate a comma—in this case, Venice, Italy.”

“Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you’ve been to college.”

“Let’s take a moment to talk about [sic]. Sic is Latin for “thus,” and one uses it—traditionally in italics, always in brackets—in quoted material to make it clear to your reader that a misspelling or eccentricity or error of fact you’re retaining for the sake of authenticity in said quoted material is indeed not your misspelling or eccentricity or error of fact but that of the person you’re quoting.”

“Em dashes (which most people simply refer to as dashes) are so called because they were traditionally the width of a capital M in any particular typeface (nowadays they tend to be a touch wider); en dashes are the width of a lowercase n.”

“En dashes are the guild secret of copyediting, and most normal people neither use them nor much know what they are nor even know how to type them.*48 I’m happy to reveal the secret. An en dash is used to hold words together instead of your standard hyphen, which usually does the trick just fine, when one is connecting a multiword proper noun to another multiword proper noun or to pretty much anything else. What the heck does that mean? It means this: a Meryl Streep–Robert De Niro comedy a New York–to–Chicago flight a World War II–era plane a Pulitzer Prize–winning play.”

“If in any given paragraph (or, to some eyes, on any given page) one particular number mandates the use of numerals, then all related uses of numbers should also be styled in numerals. That is, not: The farmer lived on seventy-five fertile acres and owned twelve cows, thirty-seven mules, and 126 chickens. but rather: The farmer lived on seventy-five fertile acres and owned 12 cows, 37 mules, and 126 chickens.”

“Numerals are generally avoided in dialogue. That is: “I bought sixteen apples, eight bottles of sparkling water, and thirty-two cans of soup,” said James, improbably. rather than “I bought 16 apples, 8 bottles of sparkling water, and 32 cans of soup,” said James, improbably.”

“Should a character say “I arrived at four thirty-two” or “I arrived at 4:32”? Unless you are forensically reconstructing the timeline of a series of unsolved murders in a quaint village in the Cotswolds, a character should, please, simply say “I arrived just after four-thirty.”

“Perhaps you were taught somewhere along the way to use the non-Jesus-oriented B.C.E. (before the Common Era) and C.E. (of the Common Era). If so, note that both B.C.E. and C.E. are set after the year: 53 B.C.E. 1654 C.E. I’ll note that, at least in my experience, writers still overwhelmingly favor B.C. and A.D., and that B.C.E. and C.E. remain about as popular, at least in the United States, as the metric system.”

“Just, please, make sure you get everything in the right place. Should I ever be touring the Moon,*2 you can be certain that my first order of business will be to take a Sharpie to the plaque that refers to humanity’s arrival there in “JULY 1969, A. D.”

“Real-world details must also be honored. You may think that readers won’t notice such things. I assure you they will.”

“You writers are all far too keen on “And then,” which can usually be trimmed to “Then” or done away with entirely. You’re also overfond of “suddenly.”

“He began to cry” = “He cried.” Dispose of all “began to”s.”

“Go light on exclamation points in dialogue. No, even lighter than that. Are you down to none yet? Good.”

“The “-ible” words and the “-able” words are easily confusable, and I’m afraid there’s no surefire trick for remembering which are which. Though it is the case that most of the “-able”s are words in their own right even if you delete the “-able” (e.g., “passable,” “manageable”) and that most of the “-ible”s are not, shorn of their “-ible,” freestanding (e.g., “tangible,” “audible”), most is not all. As, to be sure, our friend “accessible.” And see “confusable,” seven lines up. “Confus”?

“If you use “aggravate” to mean not “make a bad thing worse” but “piss the living daylights out of,” though it has for centuries been used thus, you will irritate a goodly number of people, so you might well stick, in such cases, with “irritate.” If “irritate” bores or otherwise aggravates you, can you avail yourself of one of its synonyms—among them “annoy,” “exasperate,” and, my favorite, “vex”—and save yourself, as Jewish mothers have expressed it from time immemorial, the aggravation?”

BEGS THE QUESTION When used to mean “raises the question,” this one’s no mere peeve; it’s a nuclear threat. So duck and cover and listen up. Begging the question, as the term is traditionally understood, is a kind of logical fallacy—the original Latin is petitio principii, and no, I don’t know these things off the top of my head; I look them up like any normal human being—in which one argues for the legitimacy of a conclusion by citing as evidence the very thing one is trying to prove in the first place. Circular reasoning, that is. To assert, say, that vegetables are good for you because eating them makes you healthy or that I am a first-rate copy editor because clearly my copyediting improves other people’s prose is to beg the question. Except hardly anyone anymore recognizes, much less uses, “begs the question” for that sort of thing, and the phrase has been overwhelmingly repurposed to mean “leads to an inevitable query,” as in, say, “The abject failure of five successive big-budget special-effects-laden films begs the question, Is the era of the blockbuster over and done with?”*4 People who are in the business of hating the relatively new-fashioned use of “begs the question” hate it vehemently, and they hate it loudly. Unfortunately, subbing in “raises the question” or “inspires the query” or any number of other phrasings fools no one; one can always detect the deleted “begs the question,” a kind of prose pentimento, for those of you who were paying attention in art history class or have read Lillian Hellman’s thrilling if dubiously accurate memoir.

CHOMPING AT THE BIT Yes, it’s traditionally “champing at the bit.” Yes, many people now write “chomping,” likely because the word “champing” is unfamiliar to them. In that “champing” and “chomping” are as virtually indistinguishable in meaning as they are in spelling, the condemnation of “chomping” strikes me as trifling.